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Different music, same condition: Hofstadter and Lyotard

PETER DAYAN

Perhaps the safest thing to say about the condition of music, as seen by those who write (and write about) verse, is this: if we try to define it in any kind of rigorous, academic way, we always discover it to be historical. We find that it appears, not fixed, but fluctuating with people's perspectives on the nature of truth, of meaning, of beauty, and of the relationship between the arts, humanity, divinity, and the material universe, as well as with the changing forms of music and poetry themselves. However, as soon as we allow ourselves to think in a way that comes (dare I say it?) more naturally than the rigorous and academic, we spontaneously talk about the condition of music as if it were something timeless and essential, unchanging, eternal. The writers that have always seemed to me to shed the most light upon such questions are those who do not shy away from this paradox, who combine a powerful sense of history and of their transient place within it, with the courage to assume, rather than deny, their impulse to talk about music as if it were an absolute, as if it were possible to generalise about it. Their discourse is founded upon contradictions; but for me, the truth is to be found in the functioning of those contradictions.

Helping those contradictions to rub along without too much friction, I find that within the series of relative, historically circumscribed truths concerning the condition of music, there are some which have proven to be surprisingly long-lived and widespread. They have been shared by people who, on the surface, appear to

agree about almost nothing else, and as a result, they can easily be lent an aura of general validity, going beyond contentious individual opinion. This essay seeks to bring one of those to light, by comparing two books, both published in the 1990s, which present radically different, indeed totally opposed views of what actually constitutes music, and what constitutes poetry; and yet, at a deeper level, on the question of the *condition* of music, they could be said to agree. They are books which I simply happen to have read recently because they were brought to my attention by students: Jean-François Lyotard's *Moralités postmodernes* by Matt Mendez, Douglas Hofstadter's *Le Ton beau de Marot* by Hannah Grego. Having read them, I was struck by the extraordinary contrast between their definitions of music, and the equally extraordinary similarity between the functions they ascribe to music within the field of the arts generally. Admittedly these two books are in no sense a representative sample; but I would like to suggest that their similarities are symptomatic of what has remained quite constant in our sense of the condition of music, while their contrasts point to what has not only changed over time, but has for decades commanded no consensus.

I have a strong feeling (though of course no proof) that very few people will have read both books, though both are well-known in their different spheres, and both seek to address similar questions of the status of art in the modern age. (A google search on the title of Lyotard's book gets just over 4,000 hits; a search on the title of Hofstadter's, well over 100,000; but a search on both titles used to get no hits at all, until the present article went on line.) And one can see why. Each presents a very firmly stated and unambiguous allegiance to a certain definition of art, of poetry as well as of music. Each would be very difficult to stomach for someone who fundamentally disagreed with that definition. And the two definitions are certainly utterly incompatible.

Le Ton beau de Marot's subtitle is: *In Praise of the Music of Language*. Its starting point is a little poem by Clément Marot, 24 lines long, with only three syllables in each line, which means that the rhymes occupy a third of all the syllables in the poem, and the whole poem is a mere 72 syllables long. The book, however, is of impressive dimensions: as well as 632 numbered pages, it contains 72 interleaved two-page sections, each giving one translation of the poem and a commentary on

that translation (not fortuitously, one translation for each syllable of the poem). The tales of their origins, and their juxtaposition, raise endless questions concerning what constitutes an acceptable, a good, or an excellent translation. Those questions turn out only to be answerable, really, against a background of enquiry on what we consider to be the essential features of a poem; which leads inexorably on to the question of what poetry is. This enquiry is intertwined with an examination of the possibilities, actual and theoretical, of machine translation, and of the models of artificial intelligence which underpin them, as well as with a narrative concerning the process by which Hofstadter came across or inspired the various translations that attract his attention, and a highly personal autobiographical account centring on the death of his wife, from a brain tumour, when their two children were still very young. All these strands are brought together by an impassioned profession of faith in the last chapter of the book, whose title is the same as the subtitle of the entire work: "In Praise of the Music of Language". Here, at last, Hofstadter answers a question which, for anyone interested in the condition of music in verse, will have been hanging in the air for five hundred pages: what, exactly, is the music of language, in praise of which, according to the subtitle, the book has been written? Hofstadter has, up to this point, said remarkably little about what music is, though he has cited many songs and pieces of music which have been, in various ways, relevant to his pilgrimage in search of the best ways to translate the poem. He has, on the other hand, gradually, steadily, indeed one might say stealthily, been refining his definition of poetry, by means of his reflections on how we might judge translations. He has shown why, for him, only translations that take account of the formal patterns of the original poem can be received as themselves poetic; why regular verse can only be translated as regular verse. This leads to the following assertion, on the face of it unsurprising:

the essence of the act of writing poetry is the indissoluble fusion of a medium with a message, the unsunderable wedding of form to content as equal partners. (524)

Now, he takes another step: he identifies good poetry with regular verse. And at the same time, he identifies good music with tonal music:

around the turn of the twentieth century, a wave of change started rippling through the arts. In poetry, free verse started taking over, and in the world of classical or “serious” music, tonality was dropped, at least in some quarters, and replaced by a severe, austere, unhearable cerebrality; thus did music and poetry together start down the sad slide from being sensuous and visceral to being solely intellectual. And in the course of that slide, they lost more and more of their mass appeal, in the end becoming esoterica appealing only to tiny coterie and cliques of people who listened with humorless scholasticism and pretension. (526)

He finds poetry that eschews the constraints of regular verse, like atonal music, aesthetically objectionable because in it, he cannot see content wedded to form. Instead, he sees a purely intellectual art in which “form is seen as the dog’s tail, content as its body” (527), and the artist refuses to let the formal tail wag the dog of content. This clearly does not correspond to his earlier definition of poetry. Is such modernist writing poetry, or not? Hofstadter soon provides the answer: to him, it isn’t. It usurps the name, but it is properly considered outwith the category.

Though I feel more or less compelled by social conventions to use the word “poem” to describe these verbal constructions that repel me, they don’t satisfy my earlier stab at a definition of the term, at least not as far as I can tell. (526)

Hofstadter’s opinions will doubtless strike the average reader of *Thinking Verse* as outrageously small-minded and reactionary. Is prose poetry, then, never poetry? Is all atonal music pretentious rubbish? More specifically, how can one maintain, as Hofstadter certainly seems to do here, that the “free verse” poets of the early 20th century were not very interested in form? But it is unfair to judge what he says here without having read the five hundred preceding pages. Hofstadter is not so naive as to set out these opinions before he has shown us why he might expect his readers to share them, perhaps in spite of themselves. What Hofstadter has been up to is this: he has presented the reader with endless examples of poetic originals

and translations, of all kinds, given his opinion on them, and asked the reader also to judge. In the process, he has gradually, and quite cunningly, drawn the reader into complicity with his fundamental principle that writing poetry is an exercise in wedding form to content. Content, generally speaking, we think we know how to translate. But what about form? He persuades the reader first, that form can only manifest itself as pattern; then, that translating poetry requires us to recognise patterns readily identifiable in the source language, before finding equivalents for them in the target language. This process obviously requires that the source text should contain such readily identifiable patterns; and it is first and foremost verse, regular verse, verse working with long-standing prosodic traditions already familiar to the reader, that confers them. Meanwhile, he has also (supporting his demonstration by citing Steiner's *After Babel*) shown that all reading can be construed as translation. Thus he has set up the implicit syllogism: if translating poetry requires the recognition of formal patterns (of which traditional regular verse forms are the great wellspring), and all reading of poetry is translation, then all reading of poetry requires the recognition of formal patterns – of which traditional regular verse forms are the great wellspring. It is therefore crazy, as Gautier had said more than a century before Hofstadter (in his preface to Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*), to attempt to separate poetry from verse. “Vouloir séparer le vers de la poésie, c'est une folie moderne qui ne tend à rien de moins que l'anéantissement de l'art lui-même” (“Wanting to separate poetry from verse is a modern madness, leading to nothing less than the destruction of the art itself”).

Of course, in a sense, Hofstadter is indeed being reactionary here. He knows it, and I need not set out why. The force of his argument lies in the sense that he is not trying to tell us any kind of rational truth; rather, he is trying to set out a certain set of beliefs about poetry rooted in what he calls his “religion”, which is “a reverence for pattern” (548). This religion is very deeply anchored in him, and he wants to think he is not alone in that. It would be churlish to try to explain exactly how he does this, but the sense of the importance of pattern, and of the preservation of pattern through the loss of the original matter in translation, is clearly wedded, in the book (just as content is wedded to form), to the way in which his wife, for him, remains alive, despite her physical disappearance. It

determines his definition of poetry. And that definition of poetry can only be explained, in the end, by reference to music.

For Hofstadter, as we have seen, tonality is to music what regular verse is to poetry. To lose it, for him, is to lose an essential sense of the rootedness of form in recognisable pattern. Between works of art in the two media, what we perceive first, then, in this chapter, is a series of fundamental similarities. Both are subjected to the same process of definition by exclusion. There is good poetry and bad poetry, just as there is good music and bad music. Bad poetry, however, in an essential sense, is *not really poetry at all*; the people who maintain that it is are deluding themselves. Such is Hofstadter's religious faith. Similarly, bad music is *not really music at all*. And how do we distinguish the good from the bad? Through a certain relationship between form perceived as pattern, and content, which means that neither can be separated from the other. To that extent, the condition of music is the same as the condition of poetry. Regular verse allows for the creation of that relationship between form and content, in the same way as tonality. However, there is also an equally fundamental dissymmetry in the relationship between the two media.

The title of the chapter, let us remind ourselves, and the subtitle of the book, is: *In Praise of the Music of Language*. This does not suggest that music and poetry are simply two parallel arts in different media. There exists a music of language; but Hofstadter does not posit an analogous language of music, and the reason for this is clear.

Language that is musical, language that has music, is poetry. The property of music separates two conditions of language: poetry, and non-poetry; the artistically valid, from the artistically non-valid. Later in the same chapter, Hofstadter, discussing translators of Dante, separates them into two camps. The first camp is those who "buy into the bleak and barren philosophy of "content first and last", "content and only content", or in short, *Inhalt über alles* and form can go to Hell (pardon my French)". Their "translations, when read out loud, sound indistinguishable from ordinary prose in every respect that my tin ear can detect" (546). And what is the opposite of "ordinary prose"? The title of the next section of the chapter gives the answer: "The Music of Words". The second camp, the

true translators, are those whose verse has *music* in it (Hofstadter's italics, 546). The very best translators are those "who seem to have an impeccable sense for Dante's meanings, meter, *and* rhymes – in short, for the total magic of Dante's musicality" (547). What is the difference, here, between musicality, and poeticity, apart from the fact that (revealingly) the latter is a rare word whereas the former is a common one? It is this. If we accept (as Hofstadter invites us to) that bad music is not music at all, then all music is art. There is no musical equivalent of plain prose. The same clearly does not apply to language, since there exists, not only poetry (and bad poetry which is not really poetry at all), but also "ordinary prose", in which form is perceived as subordinate to (rather than wedded to) content. It is perfectly possible to write good "ordinary prose"; ergo, not everything good in language is poetry. So how do we distinguish poetry from prose? It would be tempting to answer: poetry is in verse. However, there is clearly good verse and bad verse; and bad verse is not poetry. So the best answer we have to that question is: music. Music embodies, by its very definition, that wedding of form to content which distinguishes art. The music of language is the art of language; which is poetry. In short, the music of language is poetry. And there is no reciprocal version of this sentence, because there is no distinction in music analogous to the distinction between language and poetry.

Perhaps one might be tempted to take a step backwards, and say: music can be opposed to sound in general, in the same way that poetry can be opposed to language in general. In which case, one might have been able to say: the poetry of sound is music. This would have restored the reciprocity of music and poetry: the condition of the former and the latter would have become once again mirror images of each other. Certainly – if one assumes that music is made of sound, in the same way that poetry is made of language. But for Hofstadter, this is not a safe assumption. What defines music is not, in the last resort, its sound. It is the relationship between the form that its sound may compose, and its content.

Hofstadter invites us to consider the difference between variations on a theme in music, and variations on a theme in literature, as in Queneau's *Exercices de style*. That difference is, he says, fundamental.

What is being varied, in music, is a specific set of notes forming a definite melody and having a definite set of harmonies; this theme can thus be stated precisely and unambiguously. In language, by contrast, the object of variation is not a set of discrete letters or words but something behind the scenes: an ill-defined *event* in space and time. Being a continuous, infinitely dissectable event, it cannot be captured in any finite sequence of words; it can surely be *portrayed* using sets of words, but no portrait is authoritative or final. (225)

The theme of music, it would seem, is absolutely and forever indissolubly wedded to the physical substance composed by its notes. Its form simply cannot divorce its content. The content is not identical with the form, certainly, and we cannot define how the two relate to each other; nonetheless, without that precise form, the content would not exist. In language, on the other hand, the theme is always a perceived content, a meaning, which floats behind the words, “behind the scenes”, to some extent independently of the physical form of words. That is what founds the possibility of interlingual translation; that is why translation of words is a much easier concept to deal with than translation of music. The wedding of form to content in poetry is thus different in kind from the wedding of form to content in music. In poetry, divorce always threatens. Poetry can be translated, and whether, in translation, form as well as content is preserved always remains a worryingly open question. Good poetry can be badly translated – or badly read. Music, on the other hand, seems to represent an ideal state of art in which divorce remains unknown. It cannot be translated, because its content cannot live apart from its form.

I should say at this point that I am not, here, stating my own opinion. As an academic, I am naturally aware of many arguments that contradict Hofstadter’s. For example, plenty of definitions of “translation” are now available according to which music can indeed be translated. However, it is difficult to deny that his point of view, his working definitions of poetry, music, and translation, remain more dominant and widely shared in the cultural world today than the academic arguments which shed doubt on them. The crudest illustration of this is the simple fact that his book has been more popular than Lyotard’s, and that this popularity has been with a non-academic audience in spite of the book’s formidable physical

size, peculiar punning bilingual title, challenging structure, bewildering range of reference, and often highly interdisciplinary subject-matter. And this is not incidental. As with his sense that true poetry must be in regular verse, and true music must be tonal, Hofstadter's distinction between the condition of poetry and that of music cannot be defended in rigorous academic terms; but such a defence was never his aim. Rather, what he is professing is, he suggests, a faith, a religion, a coherent set of beliefs which is more widely shared than academics perhaps care to admit, even among academics themselves; a set of beliefs without which music and poetry themselves fall apart, but not only music and poetry: a certain sense of what holds us together.

It goes without saying that Jean-François Lyotard would have had no time at all for Douglas Hofstadter's persuasion that we should write poetry in regular verse, and music in keys. He loved the poetry and music of the 20th century that Hofstadter found so repulsive. In practical terms, then, his definition of music was completely different from Hofstadter's. He would have had no difficulty in hearing music where Hofstadter would have heard only "numbing dodecaphonic cacophonies" (544). It might seem odd to suggest, then, that he saw the condition of music in the same way as Hofstadter. But that is exactly what I will be suggesting: different music, same condition.

My examination of the condition of music, relative to that of poetry, in *Le Ton beau de Marot*, went through two phases. In the first phase, I found that the condition of music was the same as that of poetry; in the second, that an essential difference remained. I shall now attempt to show that the same applies in *Moralités postmodernes*.

In Hofstadter's book, the fundamental similarities that I tried to bring out between poetry and music centred first on the question of judgement, of definition by exclusion (only good poetry is really poetry at all, only good music is really music), and secondly, on the relationship between art, and content or meaning. Poetry, like music, but unlike "plain prose", contains an element (commonly labelled form) which cannot be reduced to content or to meaning. Although its presence or absence can be pointed to by the critic as a means for determining

whether or not we are looking at a genuine poem or a genuine work of music, it constantly eludes qualitative analysis. Belief in its quality requires faith; and communicating that faith relies on an analogy with another art. The trick, in sum, is this. We know, as Hofstadter does, that poetry which we think is bad poetry (and therefore not really poetry at all) is referred to by other people as poetry, and that “social convention” compels us to accept this. The same applies to music. We also know that we cannot prove in any rational or academic way which works are good, and which works are bad. So how can we justify our faith in the quality of poetry or of music? Only by demonstrating that this quality exists as an essence, generally believed in, independently of the individual work and whatever can be said about it. Now, obviously, works of music and works of poetry are not the same works. Therefore, if we can suggest there is a condition of music equivalent to the condition of poetry, that condition must be independent of the individual work; a condition we can call that of art. The first step in founding this aesthetic of intramedial exclusion and intermedial equivalence must therefore be to suggest that works of art in different media are good in the same way, and that this quality of the artwork, though it may be linked to what can be described, as a meaning or content, also goes beyond the describable. Lyotard takes that step in the same way as Hofstadter – except that he tends to associate not just two arts, but three, or even more, all sharing the same condition. Like Hofstadter, he affirms the similarity between the arts in the same gesture as he refuses their reduction to meaning. And again like Hofstadter, he does this by polemical means: citing writers for whom meaning seems to be everything, who refuse the otherness of art, and narrating his passionate rejection of those writers. Hofstadter’s principal *bêtes noires* are Searle and Nabokov; Lyotard’s is the historian Pierre Nora.

In “Intime est la terreur” (written in 1993), Lyotard remembers reading, in 1980:

l’article-programme que Pierre Nora, l’un des maîtres de l’école française d’histoire, publia dans le premier numéro de la revue *Le Débat*, qu’il venait de fonder. (175)

[the programmatic article which Pierre Nora, one of the masters of the French school of history, published in the first number of the journal *Le Débat*, which he had just founded.]

The very title of his journal defined Nora's programme: it was to demand a new discipline in intellectual life, a discipline requiring all writing to be accessible, precisely, to debate. The meaning of a text was to be the measure of its acceptability, because it is by its meaning that a text participates in debate; and any text which proclaimed its function as beyond debate was to be rejected.

Le moment était venu, déclarait-il en substance, de mettre un terme au désordre et à la terreur qui régnaient dans la critique et la philosophie françaises au point d'interdire tout débat. Se posant en héritiers des avant-gardes artistiques ou littéraires, renchérissant sur la poétique incompréhensible de Mallarmé ou d'Artaud, s'enivrant de proses sibyllines comme celles de Heidegger ou de Lacan, les écrivains et les penseurs parisiens se formaient en groupes et se faisaient des guerres de mots, sans souci de se faire entendre les uns des autres ni du public. (175-6)

[The time had come, so he was in substance declaring, to put an end to the disorder, to the terrorism dominating French philosophy and critical thinking to the point where all debate was forbidden. Posing as heirs to the literary and artistic avant-garde, taking to new extremes the incomprehensible poetics of writers such as Mallarmé or Artaud, intoxicated by the sybilline prose of Heidegger, Lacan and their ilk, Parisian writers and thinkers had formed themselves into groups doing battle with each other in words, without caring whether they were making themselves understood, by each other or by the public.]

Note the distinction, which Lyotard attributes to Nora, between making oneself understood, and battling with words. It supposes that for Nora, the correct function of words is to be understood; whereas for the authors whom Nora criticises, words appear to have another function, which does not lead to understanding. It should be emphasized that Lyotard does not reject absolutely, in all circumstances, Nora's principle that words must be used in such a way as to form part of a rational, comprehensible debate. Rather, it becomes clear in the essay that Lyotard's aim is to distinguish between those contexts in which debate

should indeed be sovereign – which includes the human sciences, and generally all disciplines which consider themselves subject to the experimental method and to positive reason – and those contexts in which something must always exceed debate. To the latter, to the contexts where debate is exceeded, Lyotard initially seems somewhat averse to giving a label. But one only has to examine the list of examples he gives of works which belong to those contexts, which exemplify that excess, to see that it corresponds to quite a traditional notion of art, extended only by a certain kind of theoretical or philosophical writing; and more than that: to art considered as a transmedial phenomenon, fundamentally the same whether in words, paint, or music.

Lyotard places his list in the context of a “stupeur”: he is stupefied by Nora’s apparent inability to appreciate the difference between (if I may allow myself the oversimplifying terms) art and non-art; stupefied, doubtless, because he simply cannot believe that Nora, or anyone else, could be entirely of good faith in denying that distinction. Do we not all, after all, love music, and know it exceeds reason? And do we not also know that poetry and music share an essential condition?

Ma stupeur était la suivante: les *Essais* de Montaigne pouvaient-ils faire l’objet d’un débat et pouvait-on s’y retrouver en les lisant? Les *Confessions* d’Augustin, la *Saison en Enfer*? Mais aussi la *Phénoménologie* de Hegel, celle de Husserl ou de Merleau-Ponty? Et les *Géorgiques* de Claude Simon, *Doktor Faustus*, *Le Château*? Qu’y avait-il à débattre, et quoi donc à retrouver, dans les *Demoiselles d’Avignon*, dans *La Tour Eiffel* de Delaunay, dans *Mureau* de Cage ou *Répons* de Boulez, dans le treizième quatuor à cordes de Beethoven? N’y avait-il pas dans les œuvres de la pensée, que leur matière fût de langue, de timbre ou de couleur, une solitude, un retrait, un excès sur tout discours possible, le silence d’une terreur? Et cela, non par caprice, par mode ou par défi, mais essentiellement – s’il était vrai, comme le dit Apollinaire, que l’œuvre exige de l’artiste de se faire inhumain. (176-7)

[What I found stupefying was this: could Montaigne’s *Essays* be the object of a debate and could one see where one was going as one read them? Similarly, Augustine’s *Confessions*, Rimbaud’s *Saison en Enfer*? But also Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, and Husserl’s, and Merleau-Ponty’s? And Claude Simon’s *Géorgiques*, and *Doktor Faustus*, and *The Castle*? What was there to debate, how could one find one’s way, in the *Demoiselles d’Avignon*, in

Delaunay's *La Tour Eiffel*, in Cage's *Mureau* and Boulez's *Répons*, in Beethoven's 13th string quartet? Was there not in works of thought, whether their material was language, sound, or colour, a solitude, a reticence, an excess over all possible discourse, the silence of a terror? And this, not through caprice, not out of fashion, nor as a challenge, but as an essential condition – if it were true that, as Apollinaire says, the work demands of the artist that he make himself inhuman.]

The trademark of the aesthetic tradition with which Lyotard aligns himself here is an alliance between a clear, direct, and uncompromising assertion that a category of works exists whose value cannot be determined by positive reason, and a subtle, often wily indirectness in the provision of arguments to support that assertion; arguments that are often implied by the examples given, rather than set out as such. I will allow myself time to point out some of them here.

First: Lyotard avoids saying explicitly that the works he lists are works of art. That might have seemed to imply that he could give a definition of art which would set out its boundaries, and tell us which works belong to the category. But he cannot provide such a definition, since his whole argument is based on the premiss that art cannot be subject to debate. So instead of calling these works “art”, he initially calls them works of thought, “œuvres de la pensée”. However, in the last sentence of the passage quoted here, carefully sheltering behind Apollinaire and the expression “s’il était vrai que”, he clearly gives us to understand that for him, “essentiellement”, as part of their very conditions of existence, all these works are the result of a process in which their creators acquire the label of “artiste”.

Second: Lyotard's argument against Nora depends on his reader accepting the common status of all these works as in some sense beyond debate; and as we have seen, Lyotard himself accepts, at least implicitly, that this status corresponds to the category traditionally known as art. It seems to me legitimate, then, to ask to what extent the works on his list would be traditionally accepted as works of art. The answer to this question is clearly yes in the case of the paintings mentioned. It is fairly clearly yes in the case of the three pieces of music (though Cage, it should be said, had problems with the concept of art, for much the same reasons as Lyotard). But what about the works in words? Most of them belong to genres traditionally classed as literary. Others, though, might be classed as philosophy; and the very

first, the essays of Montaigne, has long been received as on the borderline between philosophy and literature. Once again, we see that whereas the very condition of music (and like music, painting) is to be always already art, works in words are not always art, and the genre does not necessarily define the status of a work in words. A book labelled “philosophy” might be art, or it might be mere debate, mere positive reason; only the experience of reading will tell us which it is.

Third: none of the works cited by Lyotard is in verse. There is one whose title alludes to verse, and one which is traditionally classified as prose poetry; but none actually written in verse. Why not? The answer emerges, I think, if one considers the painters and composers that Lyotard alludes to. Why Picasso and Delaunay? Why Cage and Boulez? and why, when mentioning Beethoven, the thirteenth quartet? Furthermore, why charge Apollinaire with articulating the essential nature of the relationship between the work and the artist? Five of these six men were central to the 20th-century contestation of traditional artistic forms and rules, precisely that “wave of change” which, according to Hofstadter, ended in disaster for the arts. Beethoven’s late quartets, and most particularly the thirteenth with its original ending, the *Grosse Fuge*, have often been received as an extraordinary premonition and prophecy of that wave. In short, the art that seems to Lyotard most characteristic, that most clearly demonstrates the condition of art as such, is art that contests the formal tradition. In this, he is very obviously refusing Hofstadter’s definition of music. Cage and Boulez would certainly be on Hofstadter’s list of composers whose work cannot be considered true music because it is not tonal, too much based on ideas and not sufficiently rooted in readily perceived traditional form, and therefore of interest only to a narrow public. It matters, in this context, neither to Lyotard nor to Hofstadter that Boulez’s relationship to the formal tradition is utterly different from Cage’s. What is important is that neither of them writes within the generally accepted parameters of what musicologists call “common era” tonality. Non-tonal music is not music, to Hofstadter, just as poetry not in regular verse is not poetry; Lyotard’s opinion could not be more clearly opposed to Hofstadter’s. They disagree fundamentally on what constitutes music. It is all the more remarkable that they do agree on its condition.

Lyotard's rejection of Pierre Nora's principles hinges on a simple refusal of Nora's parameters. Nora's demands (as relayed by Lyotard) related only to works in words, not to paintings or musical works. Lyotard refuses those demands through an indirect reasoning which has been common to many defenders of the exceptional, extra-scientific status of the work of art since the days of the Romantics. We all accept, do we not? that paintings and works of music operate beyond the reach of rational debate; positive reason cannot judge them. But we receive certain works in words, those we read as literature, in the same way as those works in other media. Therefore, we must accept that literature cannot be judged by positive reason, and is not required to enter into debate. Once again, we find that language has two distinct conditions: the human-scientific, the positively rational, necessarily accessible to debate; and a second condition analogous to music, which is traditionally called artistic or literary. Music, however, has only one condition. Music is always art; if it is not art, it is not music. It thus proves by its very existence that art exists.

But, as Hofstadter saw so clearly, for this exceptional status of music to be secure, we must be able to say that music is not merely something made out of sound. If music is sound, then the distinction between music and sound might become dangerously similar to the distinction between poetry and language; and music might become a special use of sound (as poetry is a special use of language), rather than an aesthetic absolute. Lyotard sees the same danger, and provides the same solution.

In another essay published in *Moralités postmodernes* entitled "Musique, mutique", Lyotard describes at length the relationship between music and painting considered as arts, and their material. Significantly, literature is absent from this description; doubtless because its relationship to its material is different in kind.

Si l'œuvre est d'art, c'est qu'elle témoigne d'un excès sur ce que le corps peut sentir, sur le sensible tel que l'ensemble des institutions du corps (biologiques, culturelles) le circonscrivent. (197)

[If the work is of art, it is because it bears witness to an excess over what the body can feel, over the category of the sensible as it is circumscribed by all the institutions of the body, be they biological or cultural.]

This excess is not to be located in the material of the art, in the sound of the music or the colour of the painting; rather, Lyotard tells us, it is in an unarticulated breath, a timeless, voiceless lament which manages to slip through the articulated material form of the work. The beauty or sublimity of music is in that unarticulated breath, not in its material. And since music is nothing unless it is art, beautiful or sublime, it is nothing without that unarticulated breath. It follows that the beauty of music is dependent upon the failure of its form, which is constructed through the medium of sound, to contain the soundless excess within it. The heart of music is what we do not hear. Music tries to render it in sound; but it only succeeds as music to the extent that we sense its inability to do so. I will quote the entire last paragraph of the essay, since Lyotard's reasoning is so dense that it is difficult to segment:

Le geste musical travaille à laisser venir la plainte inaudible jusqu'à l'audible. Mais, pour cela, il doit lui donner forme. Il ne peut donc que la manquer toujours. Il la couvre. Cependant, ce vain travail peut suffire à évoquer, dans la langue musicale, le souffle de l'épouvante. Le meuglement est opiniâtre, permanent comme l'urgence de ne pas mourir. C'est pourquoi le témoignage que l'œuvre peut en porter, serait-il toujours suspect, ce témoignage que nous appelons sa beauté ou sa sublimité n'est pas non plus périssable. Il transite à travers les conjonctures historiques, comme le souffle de l'abattement se glisse à travers les battements qui segmentent l'espace sonore et qui donnent à la musique ses matériaux. (198)

[The musical gesture strives to let the inaudible lament come to audibility. But for this purpose, it must give it form. Therefore, the musical gesture will always miss its aim, miss the lament, cover the lament. This vain striving, however, may suffice to evoke, in the language of music, the breath of terror. The animal cry is stubborn, as permanent as the urgency of not dying. That is why the witness the work may bear, be it always suspect, that witness which we call its beauty or its sublimity, is similarly not mortal. It passes through the conjunctures of history just as the breath of

oppression slips between the beats which segment the sound-space and which give to music its material.]

This extraordinary passage, at the same time as it explains the fundamental difference between Lyotard's concept of form and Hofstadter's, betrays an equally extraordinary number of profound similarities between their aesthetics.

First: music, for both of them, is self-evidently an art, a question of beauty. It cannot be anything else. And what makes it so, what makes it itself, its essential condition, is not exactly contained in the audible sound which we perceive; it comes from elsewhere. Therefore, we may say that music, although its material may be sound, becomes what it is through something other than sound.

Second: the beauty that composes it, or that it composes, is not music's alone. It is at root the same as the beauty of painting or of poetry. But the distinctive condition of music is that it has no existence of any kind without that beauty.

And third: the power of music, the force of the inaudible lament which it fails to cover, stems from its relationship with death. The very title of Hofstadter's book expresses this relationship, in the pun between "ton beau" and "tombeau"; and as the book progresses, the reader becomes steadily more aware that the magic of music, for Hofstadter, is in the way it connects us with the dead: in the first place Marot, and in the second, his wife. Lyotard is characteristically less willing to tie the condition of music to the memory of specific individuals; nonetheless, nothing could be clearer from "Musique, mutique" than that music is the imperfect veil allowing us to hear the complaint of mortality, the true "tombeau".

To return to my starting point: *Le Ton beau de Marot* offers a completely different answer from *Moralités postmodernes* to the question: which works constitute music? Hofstadter rejects all modernist art, and with it all music not written in keys. Lyotard, on the contrary, does not accept that the boundaries of tonality are also those of music. Rather, for him, they symbolise nothing more than the apparent limit of art before modernism, a limit that we will never have finished transgressing (and that the art of the past also, as he reads it, in its own way transgresses). But the two books nonetheless give surprisingly similar answers to the question: what is the condition of music? Music, in both books, is art; it is nothing but art, and if it is not art, it is nothing, it is not music. Thanks to that singular status, it gives us

our best hope of appreciating the true distinctive character of art. Whoever sees that character also in verse, will know that verse, too, is art; such is the power of music to share its condition, and in the process, to confer the status of art.

Works cited.

Only two books are cited in this essay. Page numbers in brackets refer to one or other of those books (in the first part of the essay to the former, in the second part to the latter).

Hofstadter, Douglas R., *Le Ton beau de Marot: In Praise of the Music of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997).

Liotard, Jean-François, *Moralités postmodernes* (Paris: Galilée, 1993).

All translations are my own.